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ABSTRACT

Since the role of the adult educator has become so widely accepted as that of facilitator of learning rather than of content-transmitter, educators of adults should enhance their facilitating skills. An important concept for adult education then is self-directed learning, in which the learner plays the central role. The need for self-directed learning is being made greater by the realization that (1) due to rapid change, the main purpose of education must become that of helping develop skills of self-directed inquiry; (2) learning must be viewed as being the same as living; and (3) learning is a lifelong process. Personal qualities needed by effective facilitators include these: empathy, use of reward, respect for the dignity and worth of each individual, a sense of fairness and objectivity, willingness to accept new things and ideas, patience, sensitivity, humility, and commitment to own lifelong learning. The transition from teacher to facilitator of learning is difficult, but these steps can be taken to implement the role of facilitator: (1) climate setting, (2) diagnosis of needs for learning, (3) design of a learning plan, and (4) evaluation of learned outcomes. (YLB)

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FACILITATOR'S ROLE IN ADULT EDUCATION

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FACILITATOR'S ROLE IN ADULT EDUCATION

A commonly accepted role of the adult educator is one of facilitating learning. Nearly every introductory text in the field today espouses this role as essential to good adult education practice. The emphasis on facilitation is rooted in research on adult learning which has demonstrated that adults, when given the opportunity, prefer settings in which they have primary responsibility for directing their own learning (Hiemstra, 1975; Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1978, 1979).

Since the role of the adult educator has become so widely accepted as that of "facilitator of learning" rather than that of "content-transmitter", the purpose of this brief paper is to illustrate some ways in which educators of adults can enhance their facilitating skills. This will be done by first defining what is meant by self-directed learning, then reviewing selected literature on self-directed learning and facilitation, and finally discussing some of the implications of such information for practice. At least one caveat is offered. The paper is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the topic, but rather as a stimulus for further inquiry and exploration.

What is Self-Directed Learning?

Knowles (1975) defines self-directed learning as, "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 18). He further suggests that there are a myriad of other labels in the literature used to describe this process such as "self-planned learning," "inquiry method," "independent learning,"

"self-education," "self-instruction," "self-teaching," "self-study," and "autonomous learning." The trouble with most of these labels is that they are often mistakenly associated with the idea that learning occurs in isolation and is conducted by the learner entirely on an independent basis when in fact there is much mutality among a group of self-directed learners.

Tough (1979) in his description of self-planned learning suggests that various labels such as self-education, self-instruction, self-teaching, independent study, self-directed learning, and individual learning "are somewhat similar to self-planned learning projects, but not identical" (p. 42). Although he agrees that the learner may gain assistance from a variety of human and nonhuman resources, the key to being a self-planned learner is assuming responsibility for making the decisions and arrangements related to the learning activities.

Other researhers have sought to define self-directed learning as well. Hiemstra (1976) defines it as "a learning activity that is self-directed, self-initiated, and frequently carried out alone" (p. 39). Smith (1976) takes another tack by suggesting a special orientation to learning that "emphasizes the learner establishing and maintaining the major share of the responsibility for the initiative and motivation in planning and carrying out his or her learning activities" (p. 3). He further asserts that when the learner accepts this responsibility, a major consequence will be learning how to learn on his or her own or with minimal assistance from others.

Moore (1980) has also sought to describe self-directed learning from the perspective of the individual. The term he prefers is "autonomous learner" which he defines as follows:

> A fully autonomous learner is a person who can identify his learning need when he finds a problem to be solved, a skill to be acquired, or information to be obtained. He is able to articulate his need in the form of a general goal, differentiate that goal into several specific objectives, and define fairly explicitly his criteria for successful achievement. In implementing his need, he gathers the information he desires, collects ideas, practices skills, works to resolve his problems, and achieves his goals. In

> evaluating, the learner judges the appropriateness of newly acquired skills, the adequacy of his solutions, and the quality of his new ideas and knowledge. He reaches conclusions, accepting or rejecting the material, and eventually decides his goals have been achieved, or can be abandoned. The autonomous learner is thus independent.

Brookfield (1982) in an effort to clear up some of the confusion over the plethora of synonyms for self-directed learning (he has counted over eleven terms often used synonymously) has suggested the term "independent adult learning". He defines independent learning as follows: "Independent learning is that which takes place when the decisions about intermediate and terminal goals to be pursued, rate of student progress, evaluative procedures to be employed, and sources of material to be consulted are in the hands of the learner" (p. 5). Brookfield goes on to point out that the term "is applied to that learning which occurs in the natural societal setting and which is independent of external instructional direction and institutional accreditation" (p. 5). Thus the term suggests learning that is independent of external instructional direction and accreditation, and the learner responsible for deciding what, when and how to learn as well as evaluating progress.

While it is clear that there is no common agreement as to the most appropriate term to be used in describing self-directed learning, there is fairly common agreement as to the importance of the concept for adult education, and the central role the learner plays in the process. And while there will likely be continued debate in the field over which term is best, that is of secondary importance. What is of primary importance is that self-directed learning be integrated into our formal structures of education in a way that preserves the integrity and autonomy of both the offering institution and the consenting individual learner. The question of why this should be will be taken up next.

Why Self-Directed Learning?

Malcolm Knowles in his classic book Self-Directed Learning, suggests three immediate reasons why self-directed is needed today. The first reason has to do with the compelling evidence that "people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners)....They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners" (p. 14).

A second reason according to Knowles, "is that self-directed learning is more in tune with our natural processes of psychological development" (p. 14). By this Knowles' means that as human beings grow and mature they develop an increasingly deep psychological need to be independent and thereby free of controlling forces such as parents, teachers, and other adults. "An essential aspect of maturing", Knowles asserts, "is developing for our own lives -to become increasingly self-directed" (p. 15).

A third immediate need according to Knowles is the increasing emphasis on nontraditional approaches to educational practice such as open university, external degree programs, correspondence study and the like which put a heavy premium on learners taking responsibility for their own learning. "Students entering into these programs without having learned the skills of self-directed inquiry", Knowles concludes, "will experiance anxiety, frustration, and often failure, and so will their teachers" (p. 15).

Although the immediate needs described above suggest new attitudes and skills regarding self-directed learning, there are several other profound forces at play in society which make the need even greater. Most of us are familiar with the work of such futurists as Alvin Toffler

and John Naisbitt, but how well are we acquainted with the implications of their work for education and learning? According to Knowles, "the simple truth is that we are entering into a strange new world in which rapid change will be the only stable characteristic. And that simple truth has several implications for education and learning" (p. 15). First of all it is no longer reasonable nor responsible to define the purpose of education as transmitting that what is known. With the knowledge base in many professions (e.g., medicine, physics) having a "half-life" of approximately five years, the main purpose of education must become that of helping people develop skills of self-directed inquiry.

A second implication according to Knowles is "that there must be a somewhat different way of thinking about learning" (p. 16). Rather than thinking of learning as that which only takes place in schools or colleges, we must broaden our scope of learning as being the same as living. "We must learn from everything we do; we must exploit every experience as a 'learning experience.' Every institution in our community - government agency, store, recreational organization, church - becomes a resource for learning, as does every person we have access to....Learning means making use of every resource ... for our personal growth and development" (p. 16).

A third and perhaps most significant implication according to Knowles "is that it is no longer appropriate to equate education with youth. In the civilization of our forefathers it may have been possible to learn in their youthful years most of what they would need to know for the rest of their life, but this is no longer true. Education - or, even better learning - must now be defined as a lifelong process" (p. 16).

The implications of the above are clear: the need for new conceptions of educational practice that are in keeping with the sweeping changes all around us, and the recognition that learning how to learn on one's own is <u>the</u> essential human competence. Unfortunately, as

Knowles has pointed out, most educational institutions are not prepared for this type of learning nor are adult educators. And yet, that is exactly what educators of adults must learn to do. The balance of this paper will be devoted to understanding what facilitation is and how adult educators can enhance their roles as facilitators of learning. But before doing that, it is important to define the term and then look at some of the desireable qualities of an effective facilitator.

What is Facilitation?

In the most basic and fundamental sense, facilitation is as much an art as it is a practice. It is a way of knowing, feeling and behaving. It connotes a certain attitude set and philosophy perhaps best represented by humanistic or third force psychology. In more "official" terms, facilitation or the act of facilitating means "to free from difficulties or obstacles; make easier; aid; assist" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1981, p. 469).

At the heart of facilitation is an inherent belief in the goodness of life. Call it optimism, call it existentialism or spiritualism if you like. Whatever one wishes to call it, the act of facilitation must be preceded by some philosophical understanding. For me it is a belief that life's purpose is one of becoming, unfolding, growing to whatever one is capable of becoming. For me it is a genuine belief that people are inherently good and as such have an infinite potential for positive growth and constructive change. These beliefs have perhaps been overused these days, but I believe that for adult educators to be effective facilitators requires some understanding and commitment to such ideals.

A common question that usually follows my philosophical confession is "If life is inherently good, then how do you account for all the evil and destruction throughout history by seemingly

nefarious people"? This of course is an excellent question and indeed points out a fundamental contradiction between belief and factual occurrence. I counter it, however, by noting that most of what we are is what we have learned and unfortunately much of what we have learned is, in the words of George Aker (1976), "dysfunctional". That is to say, we "learn to discriminate in negative ways, we are socially conditioned to value destructive or inhumane qualities, we learn to value or at least accept the status quo and mediocrity" (Aker, 1976, p. 1). I believe, however, as does Aker (1976), that "given an appropriate environment, knowledge and opportunity, all people have a remarkable potential for constructive growth and change. The potential to learn may be affected but is not determined by age, sex, race, or any other personal, demographic or social characteristic" (p. 1).

There is no question that previous experiences can and do create significant barriers to present and future learning. For example if we believe that we can not learn, that we are stupid, that education has nothing to offer us in the way of hope and a better life (as is the case of many illiterates), then we have learned attitudes and behaviors that serve to block our potential for future growth and development. But these barriers can be reduced or even eliminated through the very process of learning which caused them in the first place.

What this suggests is a fundamental belief that for all people regardless of present condition or former circumstance, there is limitless potential for positive growth and development. For this potential to be unlocked requires of the adult educator a different kind of role. It requires commitment to the facilitation of learning rather than the more commonly accepted role of content transmitter. There are certain personal qualities needed by the adult educator in order for he or she to be an effective facilitator. The next section of this paper will look at some of these qualities.

What Personal Qualities are Needed for Effective Facilitation to Occur?

In adult education like any other profession, there exists a wide variety of stated and unstated assumptions about what constitutes effective facilitation. Ask 100 adult educators what they would identify as essential qualities of good teaching and one is likely to get 100 different answers although certain common themes of agreement would most assuredly emerge. Yet there are a few givens which tested over time would more likely characterize the effective facilitator of learning than someone who is not as effective. In the opinion of Aker (1976), effective facilitators are likely those who:

1. Have great empathy -- i.e., try to see things as seen by their students.
2. Consistently use reward, seldom if ever use punishment, and never ridicule.
3. Have a deep sense of their responsibility, enjoy their work, and like people.
4. Feel secure in their own abilities, yet believe that they can do better.
5. Have a profound respect for the dignity and worth of each individual and accept their fellow learners as they are without reservation.
6. Have a keen sense of fairness and objectivity in relating to others.
7. Are willing to accept or try out new things and ideas and avoid drawing premature conclusions.
8. Have high levels of patience.
9. Recognize the uniqueness and strengths of each individual and build upon such strenghts.
10. Are sensitive to the needs, fears, problems and goals of their fellow learners.
11. Reflect on their experiences and attempt to analyze them in terms of success and failure.
12. Are humble in regard to their role and avoid the use of power which is assumed by some educators.
13. Do not pretend to have the answers and enjoy learning along with others.
14. Are continuously expanding their range of interest.
15. Are committed to and involved in their own lifelong learning (p. 4).

The qualities identified by Aker may seem commonsensical even mundane. But as Knowles (1975) has pointed out the transition from a teacher to facilitator of learning was immensely difficult for him personally. In Knowles' own words he describes the transition this way:

> It required that I focus on what was happening in the students rather than on what I was doing. It required that I divest myself of the protective shield of an authority figure and expose as *me* - an authentic human being, with hopes, aspirations, insecurities, worries, strengths, and weaknesses. It required that I be clear about precisely what resources I did and not have that might be useful to the learners, and that I make the resources I did have accessible to them on their terms. It required that I extricate myself from the compulsion to pose as an expert who had mastered any given body of content and, instead, join my students honestly as a continuing co-learner (pp. 33-34).

For many other adult educators the transition has been equally if not more difficult. A fair question to ask is "Why is the transition so difficult particularly if the the role of facilitator of learning makes so much sense"? Much of the reason has to do with our previous exprience and socialization. When we attended "school" we were taught along fairly traditional lines in what Knowles (1975) has called "teacher-directed learning". This type of learning assumes that the learner is a dependent personality; that the learner's experience is of less value than that of the teacher; that students will be ready to learn the same things at a given level of maturity; that students enter into education with a subject-centered orientation to learning and therefore learning experiences should be organized into units of content; that students are motivated to learn in response to external rewards such as grades, awards or degrees, etc. In a sense we have been good students and learned our task well. But that 's the rub. For us to be good facilitators of learning requires significant unlearning of old habits so that new ones may that their place. Some of the unlearning has to do with a change in how we view learners, how we view education, and how we view ourselves as educators. Knowles (1980) suggests that one way of doing this is

to think of the education of adults differently. He calls this andragogy which refers to the art and science of helping adults learn. Andragogy represents the body of theory and practice on which self-directed learning is based and consists of four assumptions. These assumptions are that as an individual matures 1) their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being; 2) they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning; 3) their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles; and 4) their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of performance-centeredness (pp.44-45). Seen in this light, it is easy to understand why Knowles and other adult educators have had difficulty making the transition from their role as teacher to facilitator of learning.

Implementing the Role of Facilitator

One might ask at this juncture, "If the transition from teacher to facilitator of learning has been so difficult for noted adult educators like Malcolm Knowles, how can the rest of us who are less noteworthy make the transition"? This question, like others raised before, is a fair one but there are some direct steps one can take in implementing their role as facilitator of learning which should be less painful. In fact Knowles' book Self-Directed Learning referred to earlier, offers some excellent suggestions which will be summarized here. For a more indepth discussion, I highly recommend his book which is typically available in most public libraries.

The first step Knowles suggests is establishing a conducive environment for learning to occur. He calls this climate setting and some of the questions he raises are as follows:

> How can I quickly get the learners to become acquainted with one another as persons and as mutual resources for learning?
>
> How can I help them [participants] gain an understanding of the concept of self-directed learning?
>
> How can I help them understand my role as a facilitator and resource to self-directed learners and ensure that they will feel comfortable in relating to me in this way?
>
> And so on.

Once Knowles has established a comfortable and trusting learning environment (in my experience this takes a significant amount of time because students have to go through the same amount of unlearning as the facilitator; maybe even more), he then begins the process of planning the experience. Here he asks such questions as:

> At what points shall I decide what procedures to use, and at what points shall I present optional procedures for them [participants] to decide about?
>
> What mechanism will I propose for involving them [participants] in the decision-making process - consensus or voting by the total group, delegation of responsibility to subgroups, or delegation to an elected steering committee?

The next step in the process involves diagnosing needs for learning. Knowles considers such questions as:

> How shall we construct a model of the competencies (or content objectives, if you prefer) this particular learning experience should be concerned with?
>
> If I start with a model I have constructed, how can I present it so that they [participants] will feel free to change it or build upon it?
>
> How can I make it possible for them [participants] realistically and nonthreateningly to assess the gaps between their present level of development of competencies and the level required by the model?

Once the process for diagnosing needs has been established, the next step involves setting

goals. Here Knowles asks participants how he can help them translate their diagnosed needs into learning objectives that are clear, feasible, and at an appropriate level of specificity or generality. He also asks himself how he can suggest changes constructively.

The next step involves designing a learning plan. Knowles probes for answers to such questions as:

> What guidelines for designing a learning [illegible] will I propose?
>
> What optional models of plans will I present?
>
> What kinds of help will I give particular learners in designing their plans?
>
> What mechanisms (e.g., consulation teams) can I suggest to facilitate their [participants'] helping one another in designing their plans?

Once the learning plan is articulated, the next step involves implementation of the learning activities. Here Knowles decides which learning activities he should be personally responsible for, which should be the responsibility of subgroups, and which should be the responsibility of individuals. In addition, he considers how he can best make himself available to subgroups and individuals as they plan and carry out their learning activities.

The final step in the process involves the evaluation of learned outcomes. Again Knowles probes for answers to such questions as:

> What should be my role in feeding data to the learners regarding my perceptions of the accomplishment of their learning objectives?
>
> How can I do it so as to not create a dissonance with the learners' self-directedness?
>
> What is my responsibility for making judgements about the adequacy of the evidence of accomplishment of the learners' objectives and the adequacy of their criteria and means for validating their evidence?
>
> How can I present these judgements in such a way that they will enhance rather than diminish the learners' self-concepts as self-directed persons (pp. 34-37)?

In many ways, the success or failure of the facilitator's role has as much to do with desire as it does commitment. In the case of Knowles, it is clear by his approach illustrated above, that he is not only genuinely committed to the process but his desire is likely contagious to the learners. This has certainly been my experience for not only has it changed the way I look at the learning process, it has also changed the way I look at myself.

And yet it seems to me that for the process of facilitation to work effectively, three intangibles are required that George Aker (1976) has referred to as "indispensable virtues". These can be simply expressed in terms of the virtues of trust, humility, and love. According to Aker, "These are the three ingredients crucial to facilitating the constructive growth and development of others" (p. 6).

At first glance, the virtue of trust may seem obvious since the process of facilitation involves a healthy dose of it. And yet it may be the most difficult virtue to master. For example, the initial role of the facilitor is one of raising the consciousness of the learners to a point where they realize their capacity to learn unencumbered by past circumstances or situations. However this process often takes time and it is critically important for the facilitator to "trust" the choices and decisions of the learners, for he or she must believe that the learners will make the best possible choices and decisions for themselves. In this case, trust is a two-way street: the learners must trust the facilitator and the facilitator must trust the learners. But this is not usually in our repertoire of past experiences. Our training, as well as that of our learners, is typically based on competition with others and with competition comes suspicion. Thus, the effective facilitator must be mindful of this situation and seek consistent ways of ensuring trust. Consistency is the key since learners will be on the "lookout" for any deviations.

The virtue of humility in a way goes hand-in-hand with that of trust. For as the learners

become more empowered to control their lives and thereby control their situations, there may be an effort to credit the facilitator as the person responsible. "Such a display of gratitude", according to Aker(1976), "would not be encouraged for it is the learners who have accomplished the tasks and achieved the goals, not the facilitator. The facilitator's reward is in the internal knowledge that a group is more self-reliant, more able to learn, better equipped to identify another problem. Inevitably the facilitator learns as much as the other members of a learning group (often more) and this is a priceless gift in itself" (p. 7).

The last of the virtues, love, is perhaps the one that binds all together. For it is the love of life and its infinite goodness as Aker (1976) points out, "that serves as a stimulus for those who are fortunate enough to have careers as learning facilitators" (p. 7). I couldn't agree more.

Conclusion

This brief paper has aimed to shed light on the importance of facilitation in adult education. With the increasing recognition and understanding of the phenomena of self-directed learning and the consistent finding that adults, when given the opportunity, prefer to be in charge of their learning, it behoves adult educators to look for effective strategies for this to occur. One such strategy is the facilitation of learning. In many respects, this strategy is as old civilization. Yet with the overformalization of our educational system here in the United States during the past 100 years, it is perhaps high time to rekindle the spirit of the past so that the problems of the present and future may be resolved in a more enlightened way. Self-direction, facilitation, and the process of becoming move us closer to that ideal.

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